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The Metamorphosis of *Clermont* into *White Hall*

Clay Lancaster

Clermont, built 1798-99 for Gen. Green Clay in Madison County, Kentucky, was both a sophisticated and a provincial house. It was sophisticated in its relatively large size for an inland residence, in its combining brick construction with limestone details, in its ample fenestration, and in the use of paneling and pilaster embellishments inside. It was provincial in its squarish shape, in having two front and two back doors side by side, with a bearing wall between them bisecting the house, half of the first story serving as hall, and the balance being subdivided into parlor and dining room; and stairways were semi-enclosed in the corners of the two smaller rooms. There were four similar bedrooms on the second floor, and all seven rooms had fireplaces.

Clermont resembles an exact contemporary called *Hurricane Hall* in adjoining Fayette County, built for David Laughed. This house, too, was squarish and divided down the middle by a bearing wall, half of the first floor being the hall and the other half the parlor and dining room. The hall had a fireplace in the front section, and a staircase at the rear was banistered and rose around an open well. Three bedrooms were on the second floor, and, as at *Clermont*, a sizable garret was above. Both houses had detached kitchens. The unique feature of *Hurricane Hall* is its elaborate modillion cornice that spans horizontal eaves front and back, and also climbs steep gables on the flanks without becoming pediments. The house is four-bayed in front and three-bayed in back, with considerably smaller windows in the second story. It has been given several additions.

Eighteen-year-old Cassius Marcellus Clay, third son and youngest of six surviving children, inherited *Clermont* on two thousand acres when Gen. Green Clay died in 1828. In his *Memoirs* Cassius wrote that his father had built the "first hewn log-house in the county," and that the brick residence which replaced it "was also the first of that class."¹ The log dwelling had become the overseer's house when it burned during the Civil War

period. The permanent home was described as being "after the English manner," and as "a well-burned brick structure, with heavy range work of Kentucky marble and gray limestone, and of the Grecian style, having three porticoes of imperfect Corinthian and Doric columns."² The "imperfect" orders were Roman rather than Greek, and *Clermont* was to be incorporated into Cassius's enlarged *White Hall* of the 1860s.

The walls of *Clermont* are of Flemish bond brickwork, at least in all that are exposed (the addition covers the entire east end and four-fifths of the north side). Fenestration for the first two stories was limited to the north and south fronts, consisting of nine-over-nine-paned sashes in the first and nine-over-six-paned sashes in the second story, with 10-by-12-inch windowpanes. Garret rooms were lighted by small windows (with four-over-four-paned sashes) to either side of the chimney flues in the gables. The two facades were alike in having centered twin doors with transoms, a pair of windows to either side, and five windows to the second-story rooms above. The passage in Cassius Clay's *Memoirs* regarding "heavy range work of Kentucky marble" refers to sills and lintels of the openings, a flush belt course at the level of the second floor, and the foundations. The "porticoes" would have been later additions, replacing early steps up to the entrances.

The most consistent use of glazed brick headers in the north wall suggests that this was considered the front of the house originally. Facing the river was normal for early plantation homes, and Gen. Green Clay had proprietary interests in the area of the Kentucky River called "Clay's Ferry." As a young surveyor he had joined an enterprise to build a toll road from the falls of the Great Kanawha River in western Virginia to central Kentucky, and near his ferry he built two distilleries and several taverns. The last survivor was condemned and demolished for siting piers for the bridge of highway I-75 constructed in 1945.

The noteworthy feature of *Clermont's* interior is the woodwork. The chimneybreast in the hall or drawing room is twelve feet broad and presents four tiers of panels. Those in the outmost bays, to either side of the fireplace, are flanked by fluted pilasters with reeding in the lower part of the shaft, and they support a modillion cornice that encircles the room. The fireplace itself is enframed by typically Georgian marble slabs with a wedge-shaped keystone centered on the lintel. In 1970 an inappropriate and superfluous Federal sunburst mantel was cut down and fitted

around the opening, requiring panel alterations above.³ A peculiar double-paneled dado carries around the room beyond, similar to that in the stairhall at *Marmion* (ca. 1735) in King George County, Virginia.⁴ The *Clermont* dado is more distinctly separated by a lattice frieze and crown molding atop the lower range of panels, which is of window-sill height. A notable feature is that the marble window sills are shaped inside to correspond to the profile of the frieze crown. Only this lower section of panels continues around the parlor and dining-room walls. Pilasters separate the south doors and adjoining windows; their shafts are wider than those on the chimneybreast. Capitals of all in the drawing room are flat and squarish, and studded with small rosettes, whereas that in the parlor has a primitive cutout Corinthian design, though unrecognizable as acanthus leaves. The parlor mantel had been removed from the house, but it was restored to its original place in 1970. Its distinguishing feature is strapwork on the fascia board in the Chinese manner, resembling that in the last plate of William Pain's *The Builder's Pocket-Treasure*, published at London in 1763 and republished at Boston in 1794. Instead of a center block with meanders, that at *Clermont* has end blocks with fluting. The one mantel that has remained undisturbed in the house is that in the southeast bedroom on the second floor. It is an awkward design, having three panels to an overmantel flanked by squat pilasters that rest on crossettes at the upper corners of the bolection framing the fireplace opening, and the pilasters support a shallow, breakfront-shelf cornice.

Clermont had twin stairways ascending on either side of the partition that separates the parlor and dining room, with winders in the corners, and they continued alongside the wall of the drawing room in opposite directions, each giving access to two chambers. The lower flights probably had banisters, whereas the upper flights at least partially were enclosed. Fully enclosed were the steep steps to the garret, entered from the two north chambers and rising over the upper part of the parlor stairway.

Foundations nine feet west of the house describe a fifteen-foot-square dependency. It would have been the summer kitchen, but the material of its superstructure cannot be determined. It was accessible from the residence through an outside door next to the dining-room fireplace. There was also, in the cellar, a winter kitchen extending under both the parlor and dining room. It could be reached by steps under the stairway in the latter room and also

by a recessed arched hatch from the yard south of the big cooking fireplace. The balance of the cellar is divided into two rooms by a second stone wall perpendicular to that between them and the kitchen.

At an early date the dependency was replaced by a two-storied kitchen attached to the west flank of the house. Its outer and north walls were built on the old foundations, whereas the south front was moved forward four feet. The kitchen fireplace is not centered on the west wall, probably to utilize old footings. The front wall of the ell rises only to a little above the belt of the residence. Flemish-bond brick walls, limestone belt course, and lintels are as on the main pavilion (though lintels are trapezoidal rather than rectangular), yet the sills were of wood (some are now concrete). The surviving horizontal cornice undoubtedly resembles that which was on the house proper, now extended and bracketed, and there would have been flat, tapered rake boards on the gable ends. Windows in the wing consisted of nine-over-six-paned sashes in the first story and six-over-six-paned sashes in the second, with 7-by-9-inch glass panes. Most were still intact in the mid 1960s but soon were replaced by odd four- and six-paned sashes. There must have been a covered porch across the rear of the kitchen ell, preceding the present open lean-to with an arch in the extended end wall, dating from a later period; its two Tuscan columns may reflect supports to the earlier shelter. A large chamber over the kitchen is reached by an enclosed stairway, entered from the porch, adjoining the residence. The old outer wall was left exposed inside the addition. The old cellar hatch was bricked up; a ten-inch space behind the parlor dado adjoining the chimneypiece was not filled in, indicating that the lower kitchen was not used following the construction of the ell. A new outside entrance to the nether region was made from the east kitchen window in the north foundation wall.

The south side certainly was considered the main front of the house during the second phase of *Clermont*, the services having been relegated to the north. The house then would have faced Richmond, which, settled in 1785, was incorporated in 1809. Porticoes with classic columns, entablatures, and pediments—as opposed to porches with square posts, lintels, and perhaps gables—first put in an appearance in Kentucky about this time. A prime early example is on John Speed's *Farmington* (1810), near Louisville, built from a plan by Thomas Jefferson.⁵ Elements of

this portico miss correct proportions of more sophisticated examples in the eastern states, and the same would have been true at *Clermont*. Cassius Clay mentioned three porticoes, which must have included the rear kitchen porch, and the other two, presumably legitimate porticoes, would have sheltered the entrances. The stone podium and semicircular steps of the south portico still exist. They resemble those of the Col. Andrew Muldrow house, *Mount Airy*, built on Grier's Creek in Woodford County probably a little before 1820. Its portico was half again as wide as that on *Clermont*; it had slender Tuscan columns supporting round arches, and it was crowned by a pediment.⁶ *Mount Airy* burned in 1945. The pair of Corinthian columns on the Madison County portico are of the post Civil War period, and they probably replace smaller versions, four across the front and two against the wall, which was customary, as at *Mount Airy*. That these supports, too, were Corinthian is indicated by Cassius's testimony, and by the order of the parlor pilaster in the house, and one assumes that they were equally primitive in form. The early alterations of *Clermont* seem to have been limited to exterior additions to the house, with the interior remaining unchanged.

The drastic metamorphosis of the Clay house occurred during the 1860s. It was so drastic as to result in the surcease of *Clermont* and the creation of *White Hall*, the older residence becoming a rear appendage to the new mansion. Cassius Marcellus Clay had gone to Washington with Abraham Lincoln in 1861 to be the president's bodyguard, and soon Lincoln appointed Clay ambassador to the court of the czars at St. Petersburg. It was while he was away in Russia that the transformation of the house took place. The design was by Maj. Thomas Lewinski, of whom Cassius Clay wrote in his *Memoirs*: "He was a Polish emigré, a man of general education, speaking French and English, and an engineer. When I was Colonel of the Fayette Uniformed Legion, he acted as my adjutant, and formed quite an attachment for me. He married a Kentucky woman; and was the faithful and efficient architect who built the addition to my residence."⁷ Major Lewinski's first place of residence in Kentucky was Louisville, whence he came to Lexington in 1842. Over the next few years he designed Christ Church, and houses for James B. Clay and Thomas Hart Clay, sons of Henry Clay, and in the mid 1850s he drew plans for rebuilding *Ashland*, after it had been inherited by James B. Clay.⁸ Lewinski defended Cassius's unpopular anti-slavery

paper, *The True American*, and it was only natural that he should have been chosen to do his architectural work as for the Lexington branch of the family. The builder was John McMurtry, himself a full-fledged architect, who had designed and built cemetery gateways for Paris and Lexington, the First Baptist Church and the Transylvania Medical Hall, such Greek Revival residences as the John McCauley house in Lexington and Innes houses on the Russell Cave Pike, the Gothic Revival *Ingelside* and William Elley villa, the bracketed Squire Bassett house, and the Italianate *Lyndhurst* begun for William Fleming in 1860.⁹ The last two show a style affinity to *White Hall*. Lewinski and McMurtry had worked together closely on many projects, and it is not unlikely that the latter made more than a superintendent's contribution to the final effect.

The alteration called for a third orientation, facing east and the Lexington-Richmond Pike. The new addition to the front and north more than doubled the size of *Clermont*. It was full three-storied, including a superstructure over the drawing room half of the house. The narrow, advanced center pavilion, with tall, square-piered porch, coupled arched windows, pierced corners, flanked by three-bayed symmetrical wings, with pilasters separating the windows, produces a strained verticality that is arrested at the top by deep horizontal eaves and low-pitched gables, which are upheld on elongated dentils and a few spidery brackets. There are two cast-iron railings ordered from a catalog. If meant to impress, the expected effect fails through the repetition of commonplace elements of disproportionate shape, and from mediocrity of details. The first floor of the *White Hall* addition was made level with the main floor of *Clermont*, but with sixteen-foot ceilings, a fourth higher than those in the old house, and with the original stairways removed, circulation was awkward and confused on the various upper levels. The former lack of a major staircase was more than compensated for by the great sweeping structure occupying one arm of the new L-shaped hall. A continuous flight of nearly thirty steps turns around an oblong well fifty-inches wide, with a peculiar landing at the top, one step below the upper hall floor, to reduce the stringer thickness. Back of the stairs is an odd little reception room with a sort of vault effect under the steps. Opposite is the great square ballroom, divided into two unequal sections by a screen of Corinthian columns supporting a full entablature, a misplaced feature here for

carrying partitions above. Only the console cornice encompasses the walls. The larger section is rectangular and the smaller T-shaped, expanding into a wide bay window on the far end of the house. Niches are set in splayed corners of the crossbar. An ornate plaster centerpiece in the ceiling of the large section is provided for the chandelier. The present mid-nineteenth-century marble chimneypiece was removed from the John Wesley Hunt house in Lexington during its restoration in 1969. Its mate is in the little reception room. The transverse arm of the hall opens into the old drawing room and into a service stairhall at the back. There are two bedrooms over the ballroom, each with fireplace and two small dressing rooms or closets. Similar rooms are on the third floor, with another chamber over the staircase, all having limited fenestration. This part of the house was heated by furnaces in the cellar, with ducts bringing hot air up into the fireplaces.

Clermont lost all but the westernmost pair of windows in the north side of the house in the enlargement. Those in the drawing room were left as recesses, balancing the remaining pair in the south wall. The dining room henceforth had only a single window, without even a transom over the outside door. A deep, clumsy press facing the fireplace was installed in the corner where the stairway had been (it was removed in 1970). The parlor became a library. Tall double doors replaced those in the south entrances, and a portico of greater height was built on the old stone podium, the cornice being practically up to second-story window-sill level. It was later enclosed as a sun parlor, which entailed boxing in two sides of the columns. The center window above was bricked up, leaving the stone lintel in place, evidently to lend as much support as possible for the third story that rose over the east part of *Clermont*. Windows in this block were modernized with square sills and two-paned sashes. (In 1970 the two in the southwest bedroom were given six-over-nine-paned sashes, unlike any elsewhere in the building.) The back porch was integrated with the kitchen by the extension of the end wall having an arch in it; and two windows eliminated from the main block for the addition were inserted in the second story. A pair of Tuscan columns, supporting the rear architrave, are of stone, like their contemporaries in the south portico. The kitchen facilities remained unchanged. The cellar now was reached by a hatch under the window of the new service hall, as well as from inside via the service-hall stairs.

The removal of the parlor and dining-room stairways left the upper chambers of *Clermont* somewhat isolated. The former northeast bedroom was completely enveloped by new construction and was eradicated. Its fireplace was filled in; half of its space went into enlarging the southeast bedroom, and the balance was divided into three dressing rooms or closets. The southwest chamber was enlarged into the space formerly occupied by the parlor stairs. The northwest room remained the same size, and it was given a new window alongside the fireplace. Access to all three bedrooms was down a flight of steps in the former back stairwell, descending from the second-floor service hall. The only bathroom in *White Hall* is at the top of these steps, and there is a storage tank above in which rain water was collected from the roof. An ugly little high-ceilinged chamber with a bulging wall in front of one of its windows, back of the staircase, is entered up two steps from the southeast chamber. The new bedroom over the latter is reached by a separate flight of steps ascending from the service hall, and the low-ceilinged west chamber in the old garret is accessible only through it.

Cassius Marcellus Clay began using the new name for his return address on correspondence written in the 1840s, it being worded "White Hall P. O. Ky."¹⁰ The nearby settlement with post office *may* have taken its title from the homestead, like "Kirklivingston" (the house was called *Kirklevington*) in Fayette County. Local tradition links the name *White Hall* with the palace at St. Petersburg, but Clay's connection with Russia as the American ambassador was two decades in the future, a last-minute appointment, and it would hardly have been anticipated before mid century. The two-word form is more proper to a building than to a town, and it is possible that it came from Whitehall in London, a synonym for the English government because of the many administrative offices on the street, and architecturally notable for Inigo Jones's banqueting hall (1619-21) of Whitehall Palace. The Lewinski-McMurtry additions may have been meant to achieve the lordly mansion that Clay had envisioned earlier.

The metamorphosis of *Clermont* into the new *White Hall* was a gain in magnitude, but it meant its magnification into an ungainly house. Rooms in the Green Clay residence became either larger or darker, or both, and those on the upper floors were reached circuitously. The principal rooms in the addition were big and coarse; the minor were only coarse. The Italianate style that Maj.

Thomas Lewinski had employed with charming results in James B. Clay's residence of 1845 and Alexander H. Brand's *Cane Run* of 1854 had degenerated from the virile Tuscan and irregular-villa types into Bracketed Eclecticism by the 1860s.¹¹ Besides overshadowing the old dwelling by sheer bulk, the new design was imposed upon it through detail alterations, such as deepening and bracketing the eaves (the same forms even replaced raking boards on gables); larger window panes gave the fenestration a blank look; and plain chimneys were rebuilt into dislocated pedestals, composed of bases, paneled shafts, and copings with dentils. The irregularity of a spirited provincialism, such as manifested in *Clermont*, is refreshing; it is diametrically opposed to the oppressiveness of a degenerate deformity due to the prolonged use of a style already rather prosaic, like that employed in the additions to *White Hall*. By mostly superficial alterations and the appendage of a cast-iron front veranda, Lewinski similarly bastardized the John Pope house (1811) in Lexington, originally designed by Benjamin Henry Latrobe, for John A. Woolfolk in 1865.¹² The Pope house has received worse abuse than *White Hall* in this century, having been converted into an apartment building. A party stairway now rises inside the domed circular rotunda, which is further divided by miscellaneous partitions. Two-storied porches, supported by brick piers, utilize former veranda railings, and the walls have been mutilated by original windows having been enlarged into French doors. America would be two counts more beautiful if both of these houses were stripped of their pedestrian excrescences and restored to their early-nineteenth-century attractiveness.

NOTES

¹*The Life of Cassius Marcellus Clay* (Cincinnati: J. F. Brennan, 1886), 20.

²*Life of . . . Clay*, 19.

³Rexford Newcomb, *Architecture in Old Kentucky* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1953), plate 39A. This illustration is captioned simply as "Typical Kentucky paneling" without actual identification. See figure 5.

⁴Thomas Tileston Waterman, *The Mansions of Virginia, 1706-1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945), illustrated p. [72].

⁵Fiske Kimball, "Jefferson's Designs for Two Kentucky Houses," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 9 (October 1950): 14-16.

⁶Elizabeth Simpson, *The Enchanted Bluegrass* (Lexington: Transylvania Press, 1938), illustrated pp. 62-64.

⁷*Life of . . . Clay*, 107.

⁸Clay Lancaster, "Major Thomas Lewinski: Emigré Architect in Kentucky," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 11 (December 1952): 13-[20].

⁹Clay Lancaster, *Back Streets and Pine Trees, The Work of John McMurtry, Nineteenth Century Architect-Builder of Kentucky* (Lexington: Bur Press, 1956), 12-15, 25-27, 39-56, 68-77, 83-84.

¹⁰Mr. Burton Milward called my attention to this first use of the name of "White Hall." See "Some Unpublished Letters of and about Cassius M. Clay, 'Lion' of White Hall," edited by Cassius M. Clay of Paris, Ky., *The Filson Club History Quarterly* 31 (January 1957): 22, note 29.

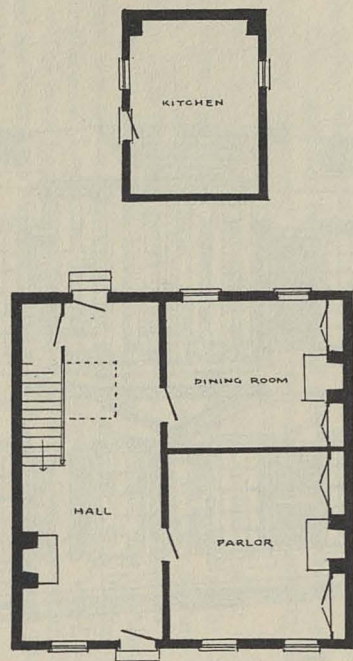
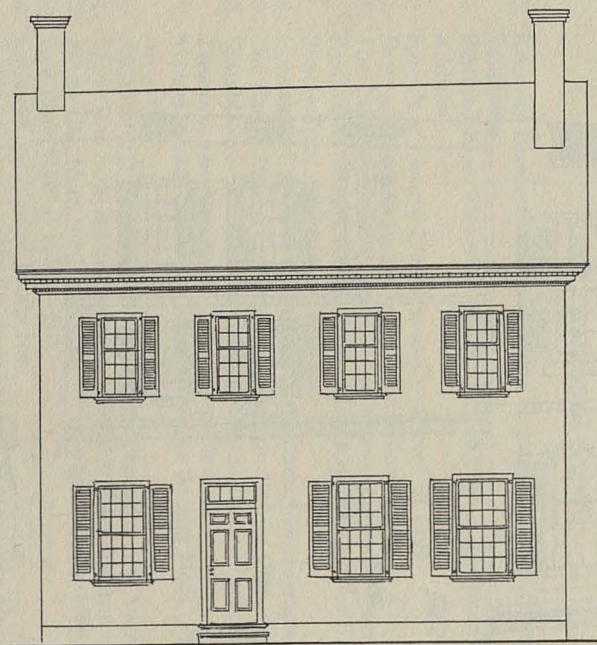
¹¹The James B. Clay house is on Forest Avenue, that of Alexander H. Brand was on the Newtown Pike. Clay Lancaster, *Ante Bellum Houses of the Bluegrass* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1961), 134-37.

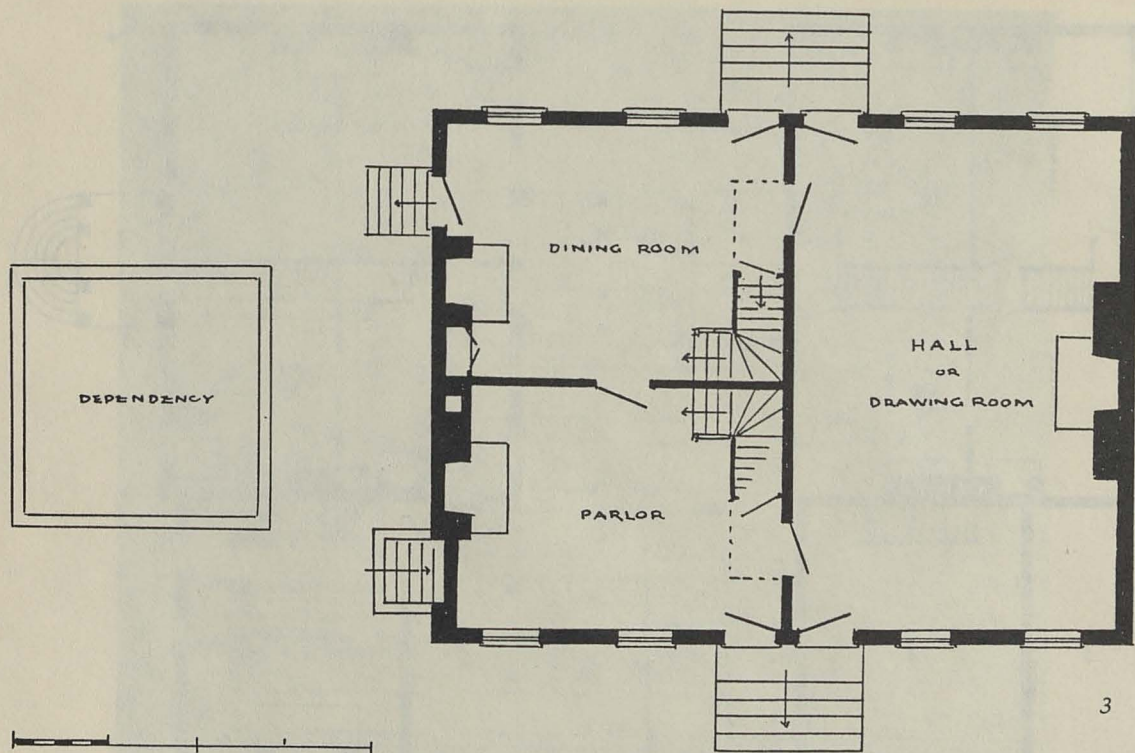
¹²The Pope house is on Grosvenor Avenue. Clay Lancaster, "Latrobe and the John Pope House," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 29 (April 1946): [213]-224.

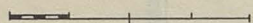
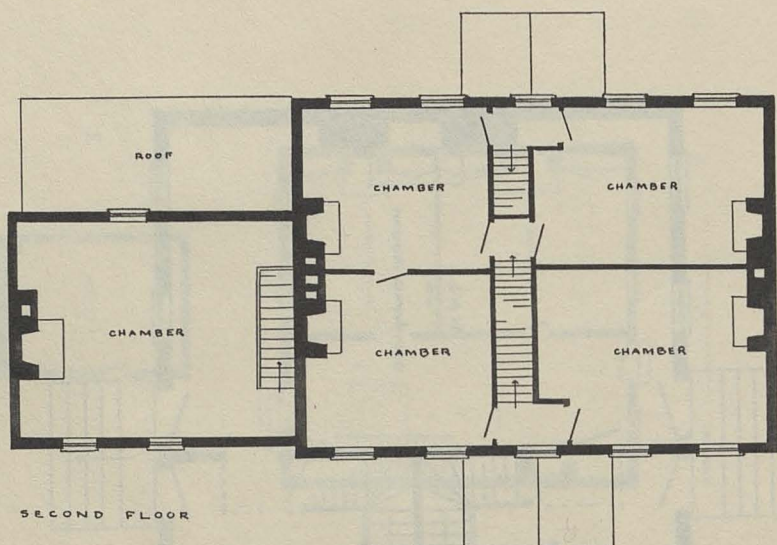
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- Unless otherwise noted the drawings and photographs are by the author.

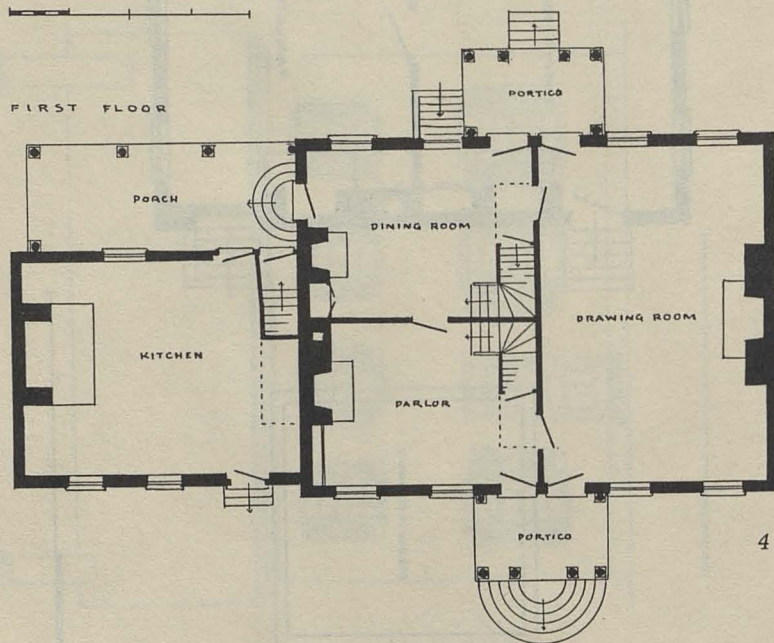




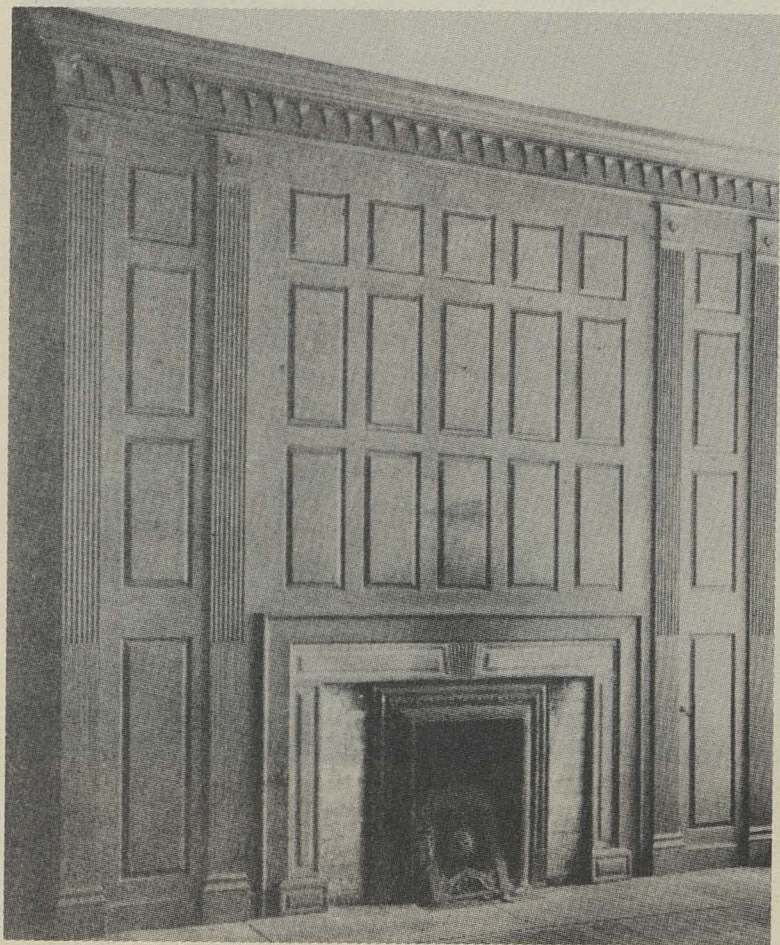




FIRST FLOOR



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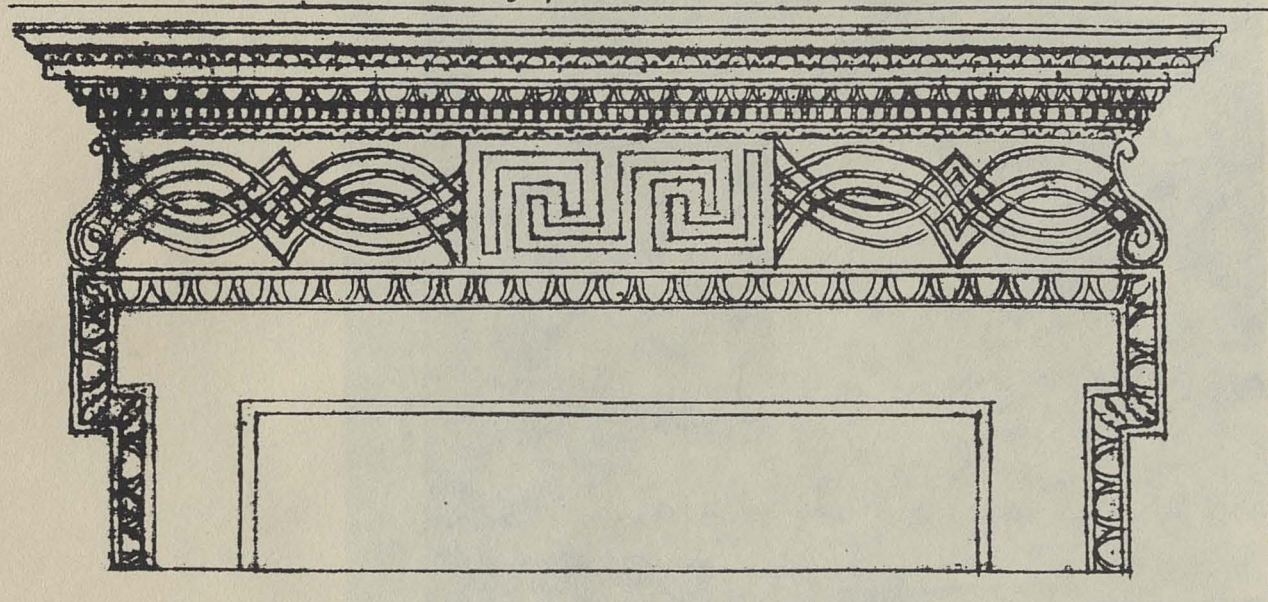


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Entablature for Chimney-piece

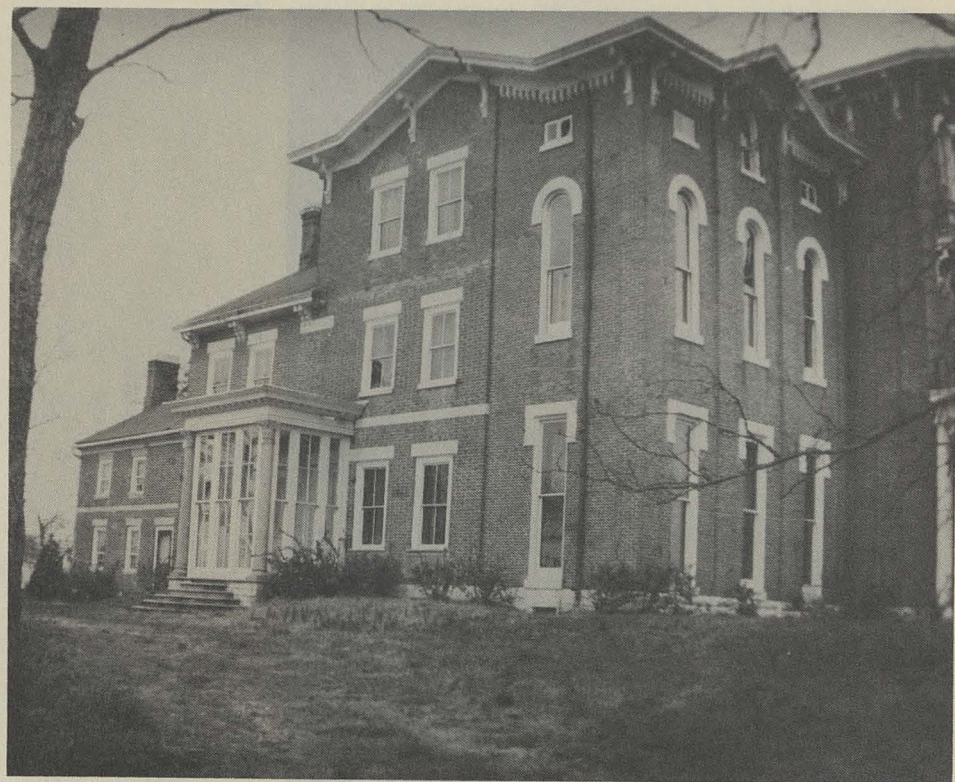




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